FOR CHILDREN

Three Precious Pearls

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Three Precious Pearls

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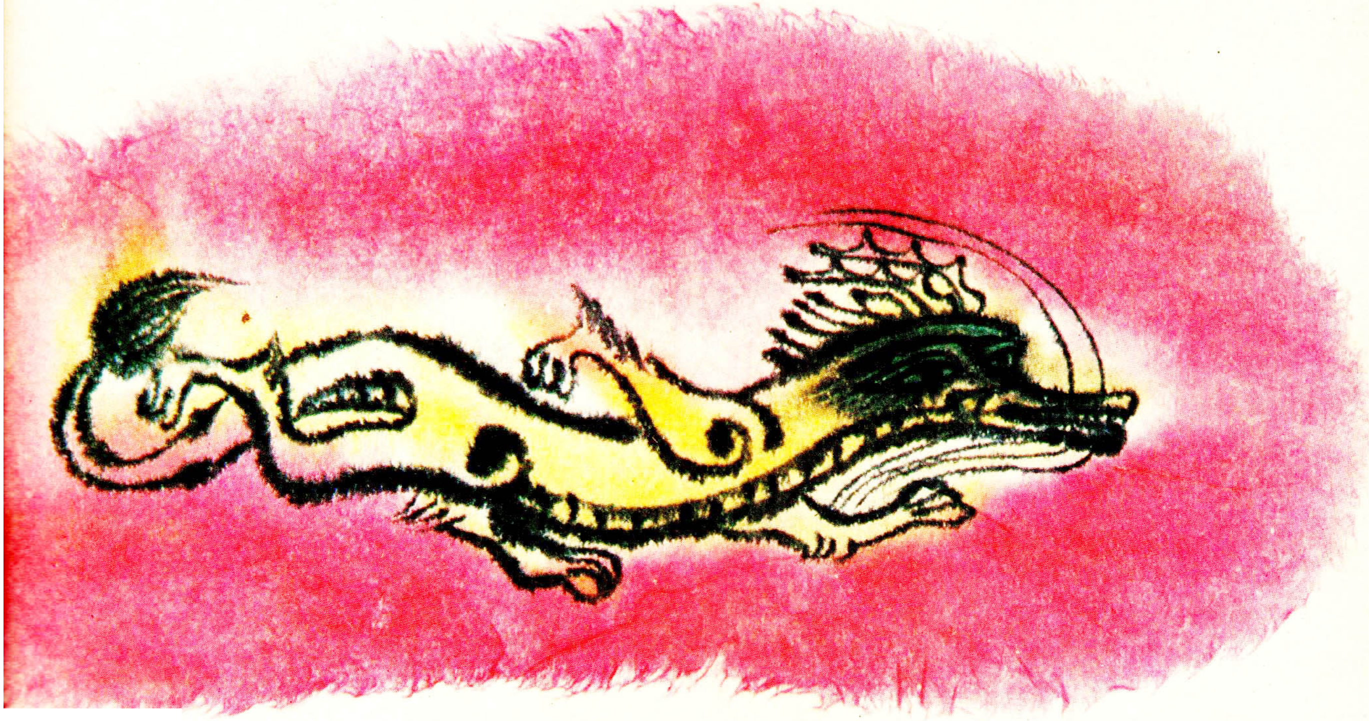

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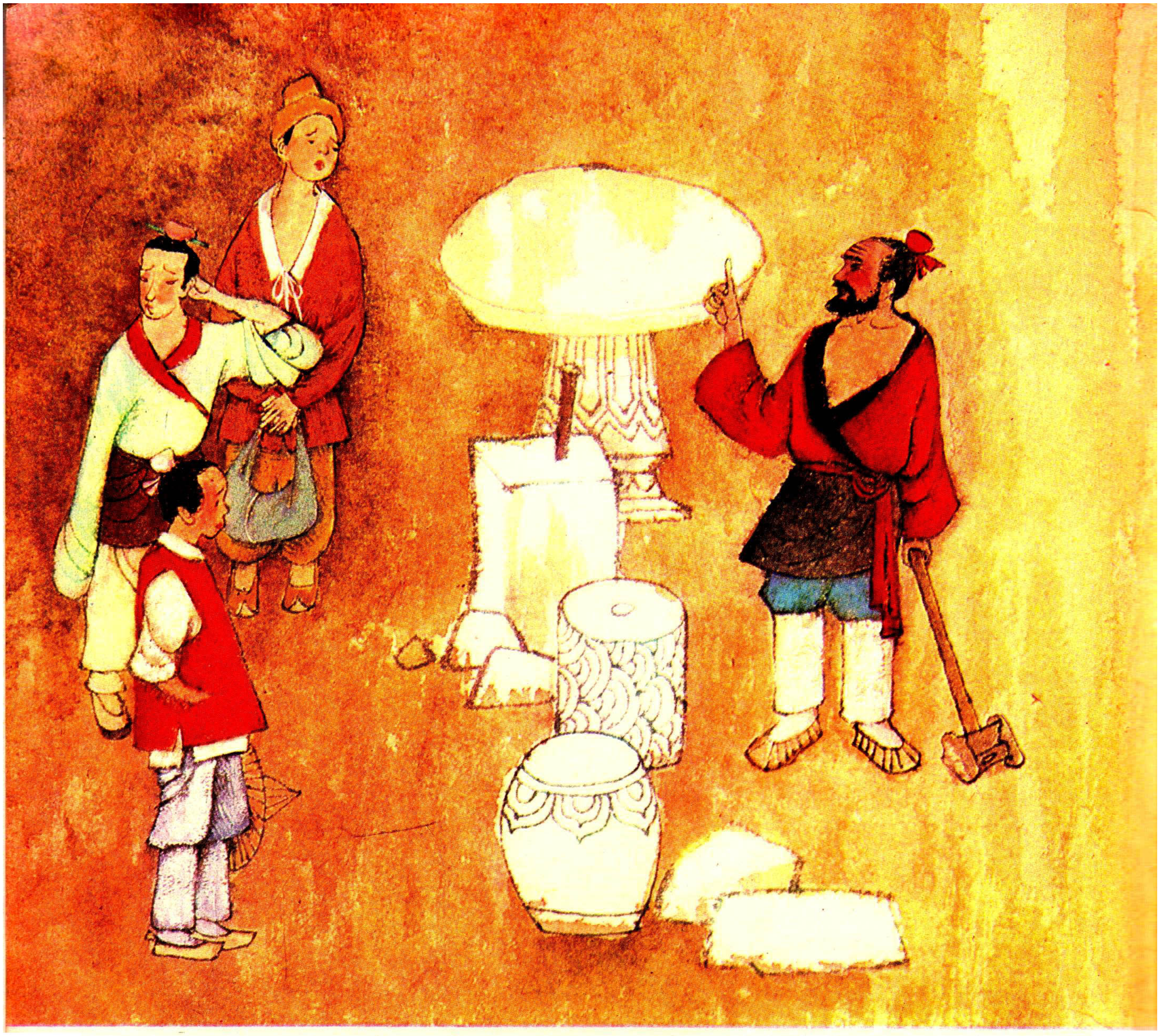


Once upon a time, there was an old stone cutter who lived on a mountain. He could shape stones into beautiful objects and could make mills, rollers, tables and benches of stone. Because of his superb skills, everybody had great respect for him.

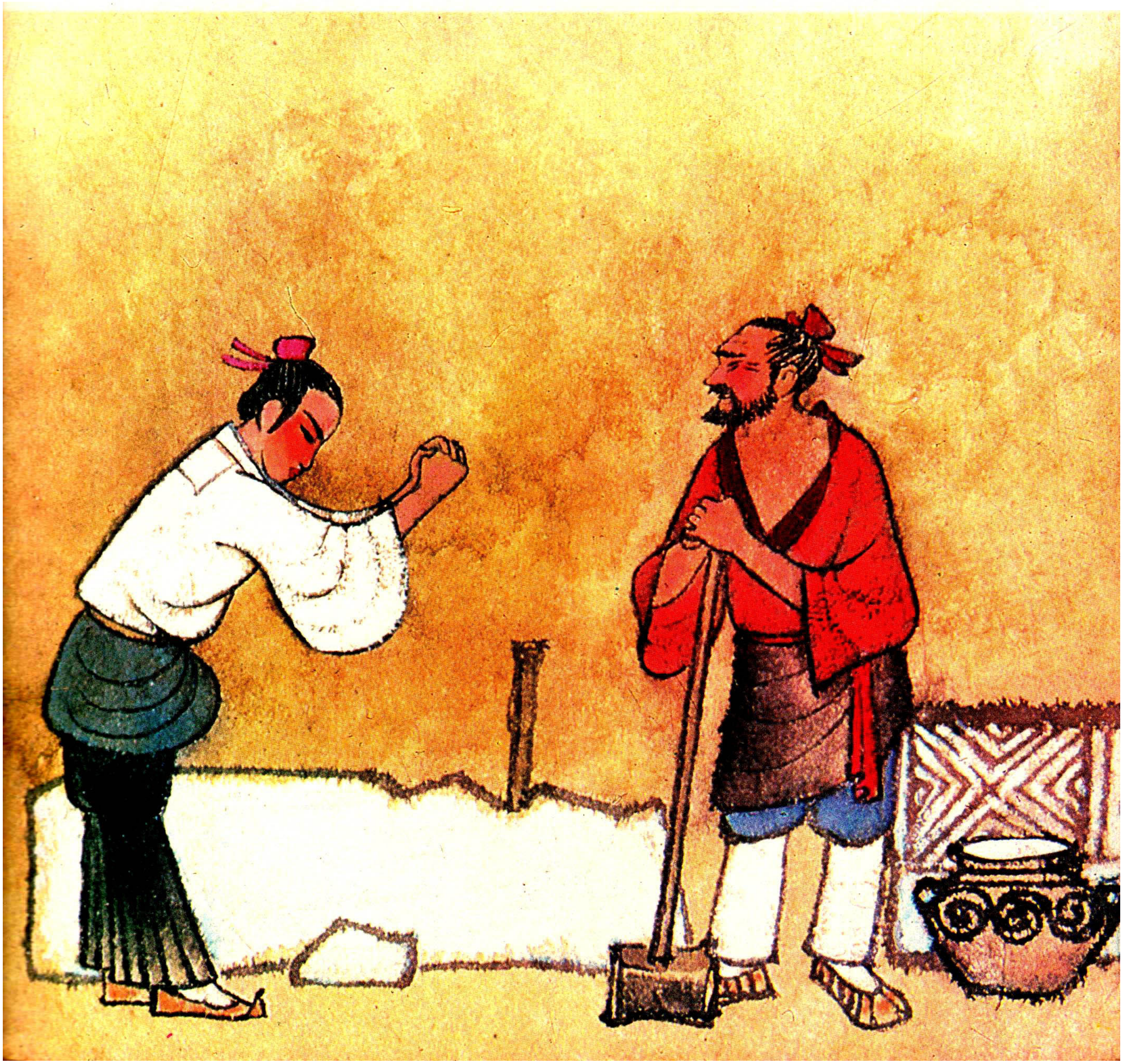
The old mason wanted to train an apprentice. But before he would accept a boy as his apprentice, he asked the boy to do something for him. Many boys who came to ask for the job went away as soon as they heard the mere mention of the task.

But one day a boy named Shi Wa arrived to ask the old stone cutter to become his apprentice.

The old mason said: "You must first do a task for me. When you have finished it I'll take you as my apprentice."

Shi Wa replied: "I'll do it without fail."

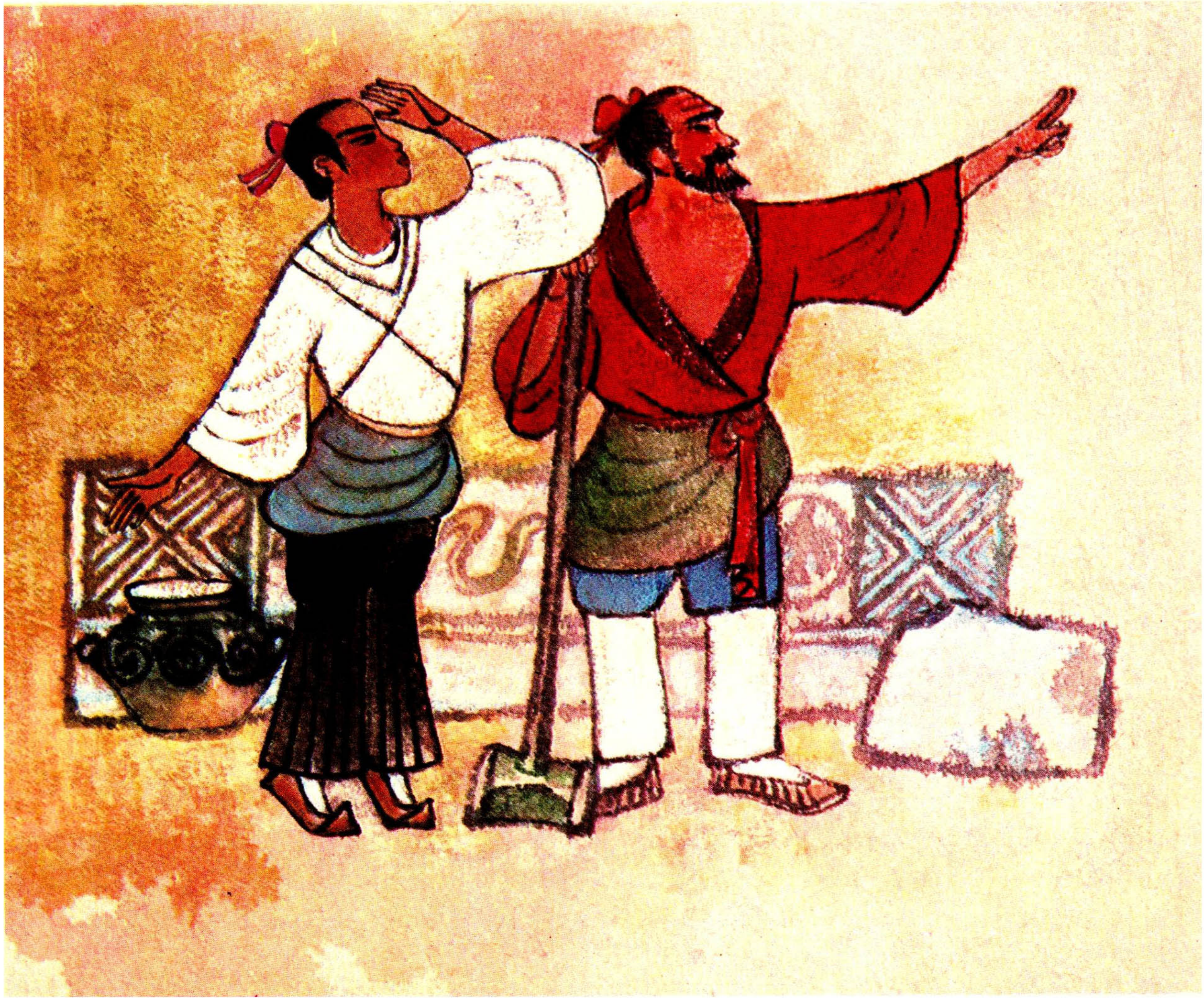
The mason said smilingly, "When it is raining, or windy or the weather is too hot, I can barely cut my stones up here on this mountain. I need a magic pearl that can keep off the rain, a pearl that can shelter me from the wind and one that can keep the hot weather in check. If you can find these three precious magic pearls, I'll take you as my apprentice."

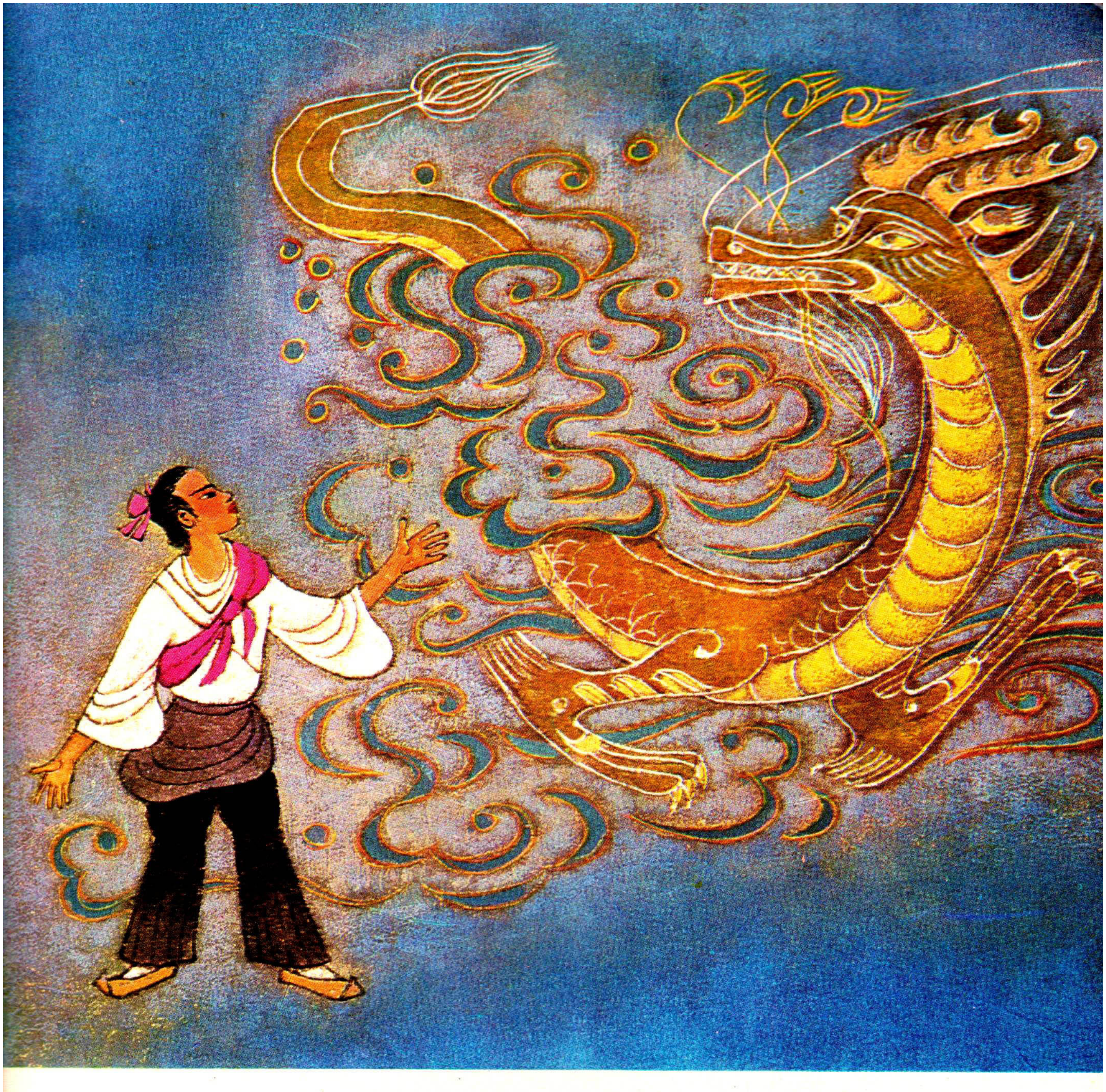


Shi Wa thought for a while, then he said: "Master, could you tell me where to find the pearls?"

The old stone cutter laughed heartily and said: "You are not daunted by it. Go south for one thousand *li* where there is a vast stretch of pine trees. In the pine trees lives a wise old man who knows everything. You can ask him. The problem is that it is a long journey. You will need to climb the mountain and cross the sea and you'll encounter jackals, wolves, tigers and leopards. Aren't you afraid of them?"

Shi Wa replied: "So long as I can find these precious pearls, I am afraid of nothing."

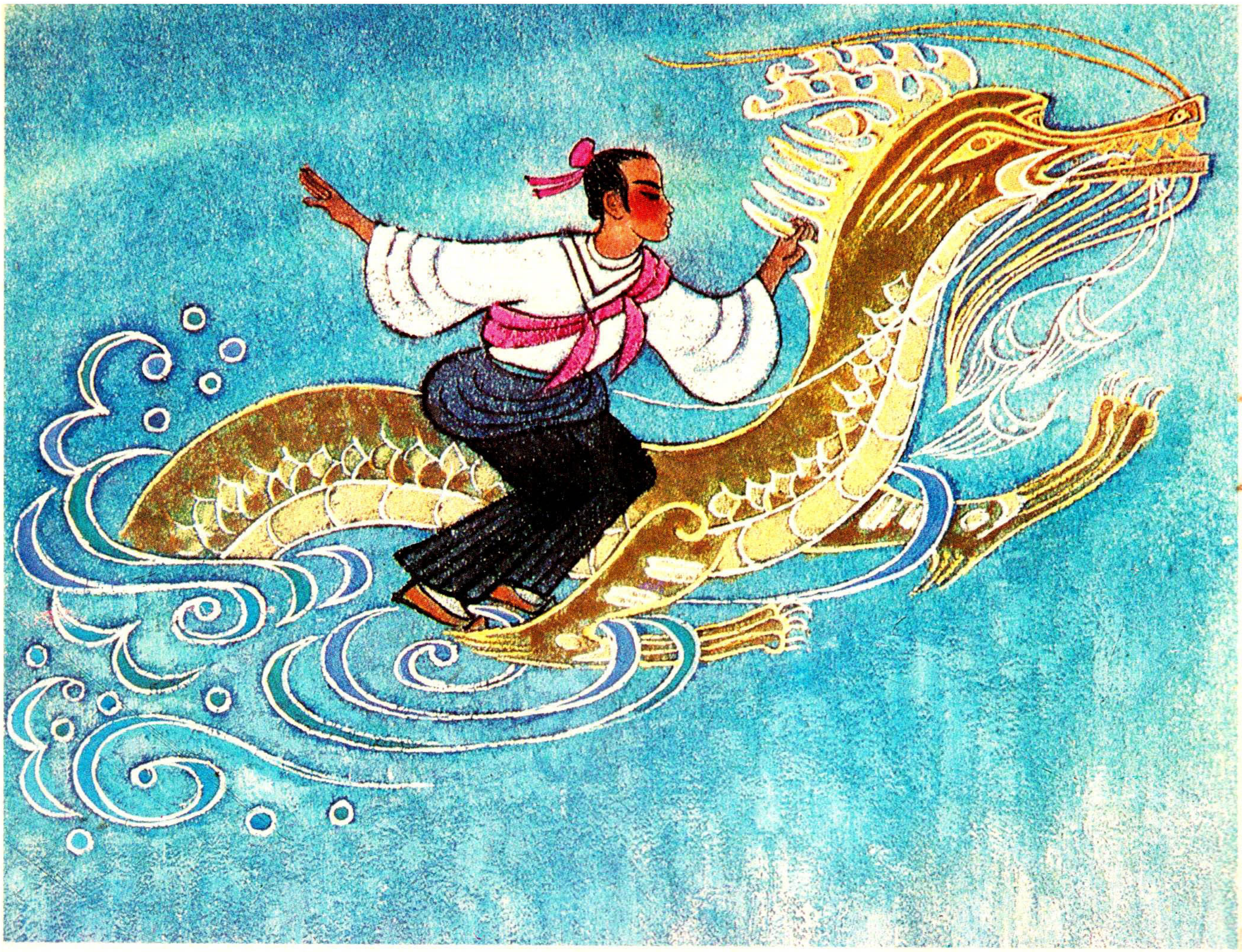




Shi Wa departed on his journey. He went on and on until he came to a great roaring river white with waves and foam. "How can I cross the river?" Shi Wa wondered.

Suddenly he saw a giant golden dragon oozing from the seething waves. Shi Wa hastily called out: "Golden dragon, could you carry me across the river? I am going to see the wise old man."

"If you want to see the wise old man, you will encounter some difficulties. I'll carry you across the river!"



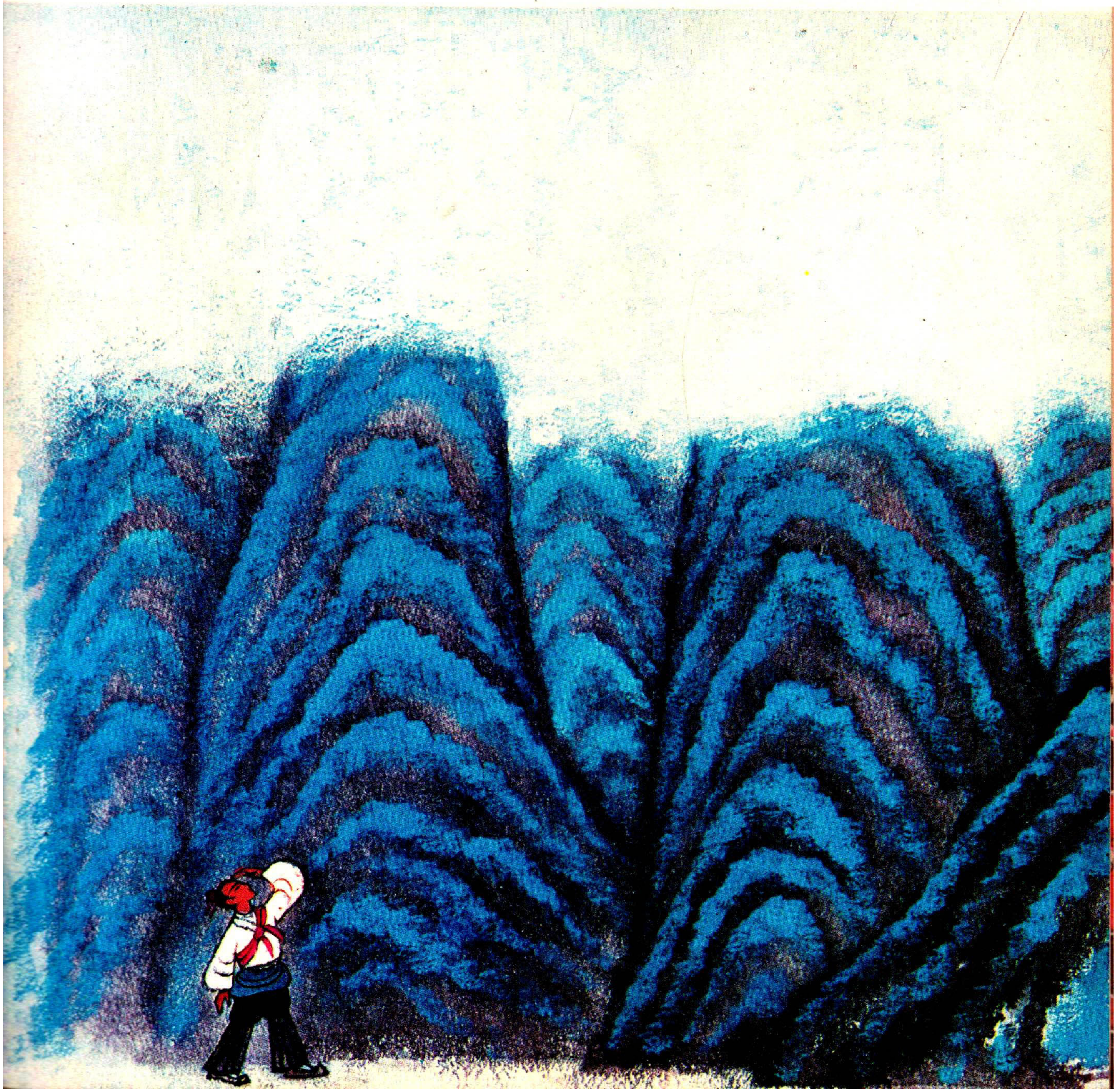
After the golden dragon carried Shi Wa across the river, Shi Wa said, "Golden dragon, thank you for your help."

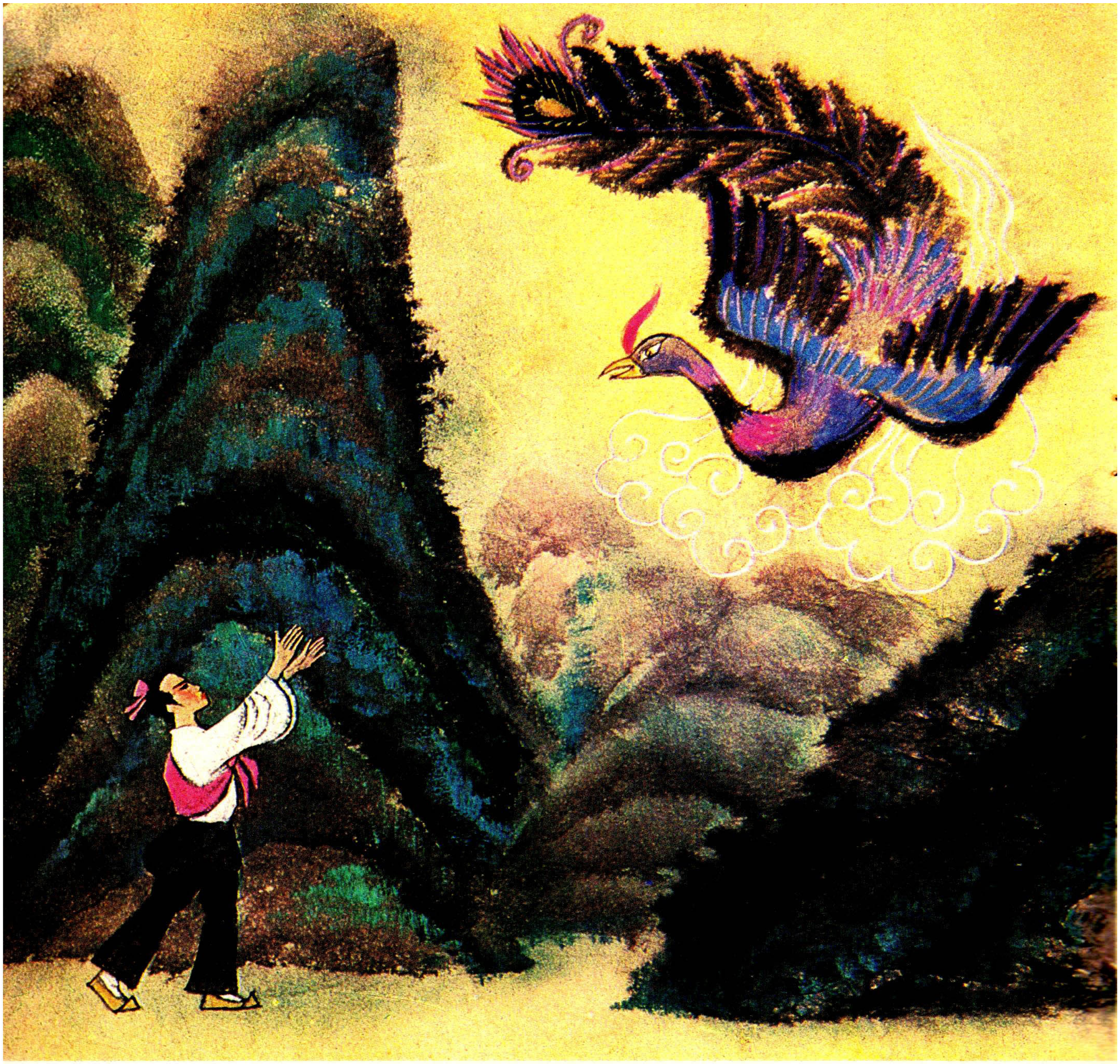
The golden dragon replied, "Don't mention it. I'll ask you to do a favour for me. If you meet the wise old man, could you ask him when I will be able to summon the wind and rain in the sky?"

"Certainly. I'll inquire about it for you." Shi Wa readily promised.

Shi Wa continued on his way until he came to a towering mountain with no slopes.

He thought, "How can I climb over this mountain?"





All of a sudden, Shi Wa heard a rush of wings and saw a big phoenix fly towards him from the mountaintop.

Shi Wa shouted to the bird, "Phoenix, could you carry me across the mountain? I am going to the wise old man."

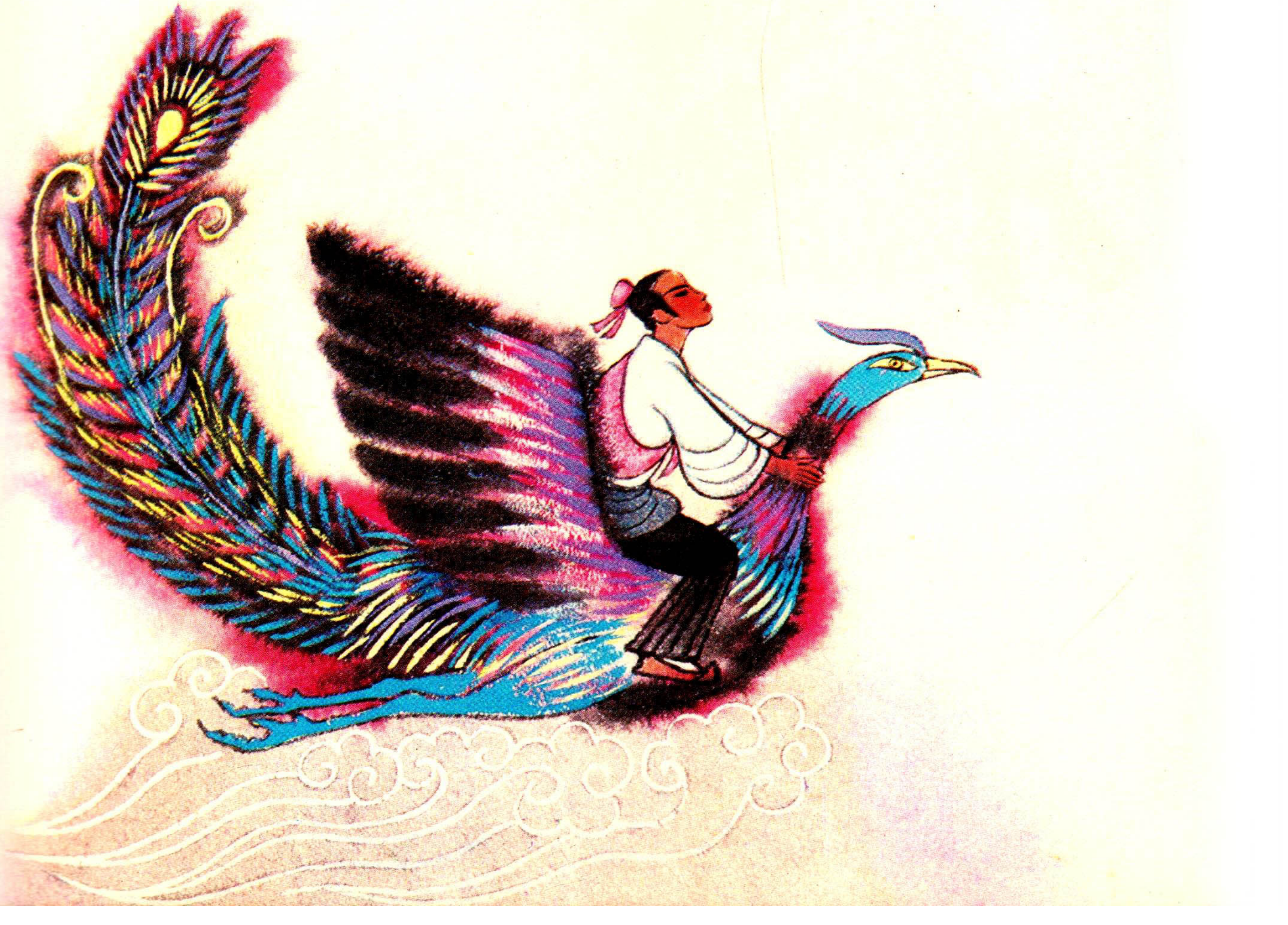
The phoenix replied: "If you want to see the wise old man, it means that you will encounter some awkwardness. I'll carry you across the mountain."

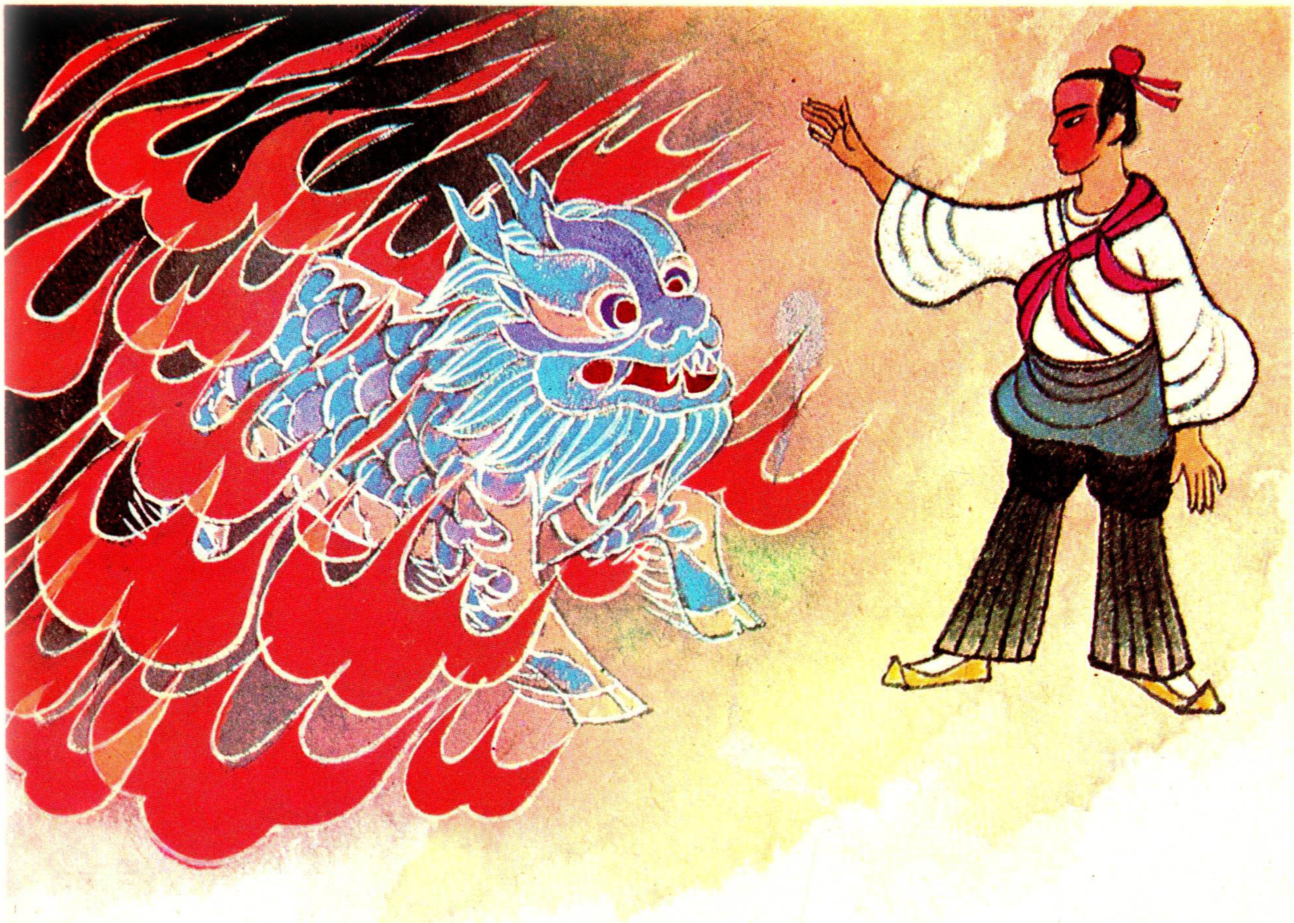
Shi Wa climbed on the back of the phoenix and the phoenix spread its wings and flew over the mountain.

Shi Wa said, "Phoenix, thank you for your help."

"Not at all. I want you to ask the wise old man a question for me. When will I be able to mount the clouds and ride the mist?" the phoenix asked.

Shi Wa said: "Alright. I will inquire about it for you."



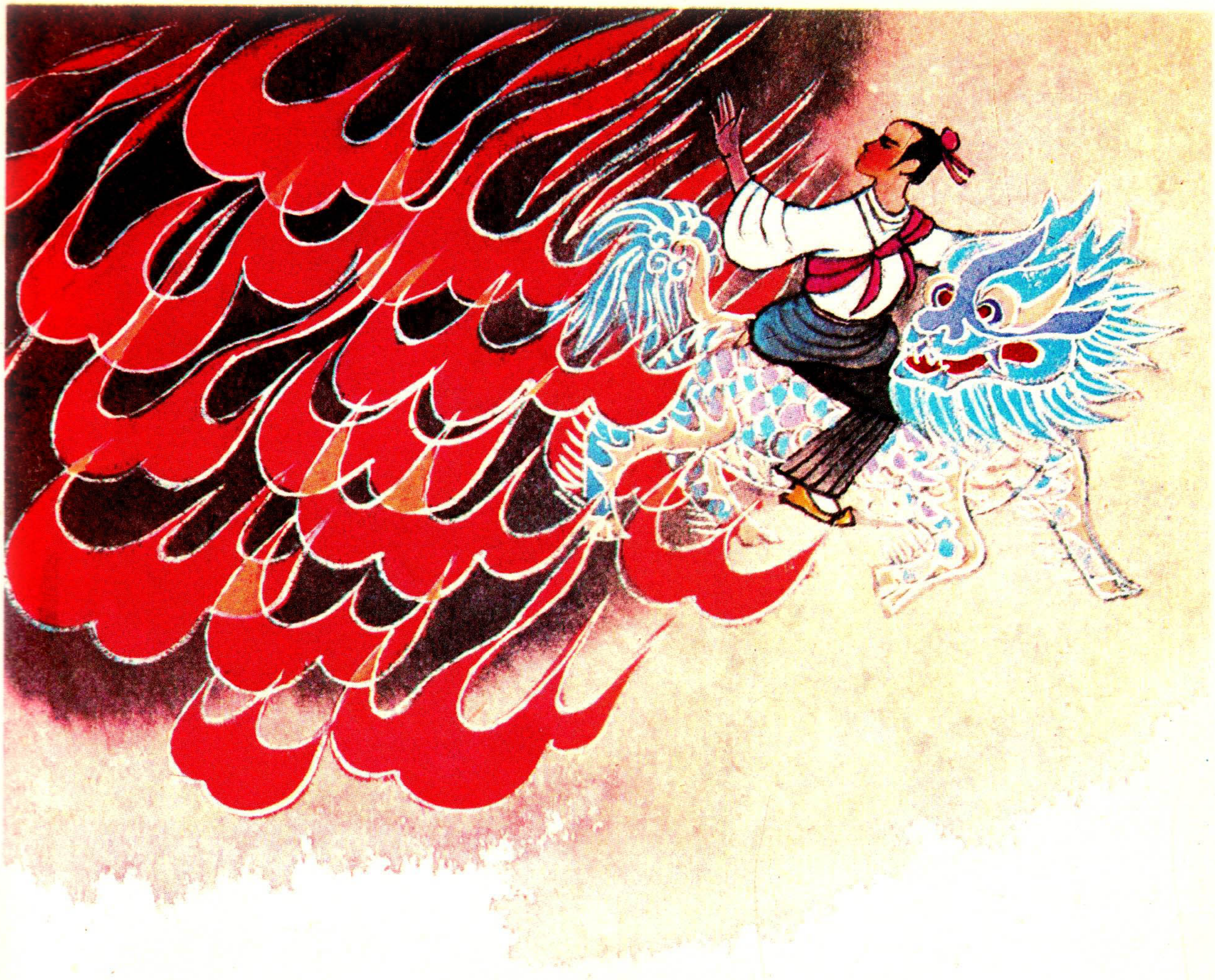


Shi Wa continued on his way until he saw a sea of fire before him. The flames lit up the sky.

"How can I plunge into a sea of flames?" Shi Wa worried.

Suddenly, a unicorn came out of the flames and Shi Wa shouted at once, "Unicorn, could you carry me over the sea of flames? I want to see the wise old man."

The unicorn said, "If you want to see the wise old man, it means that you will encounter some problems. I'll help you!"



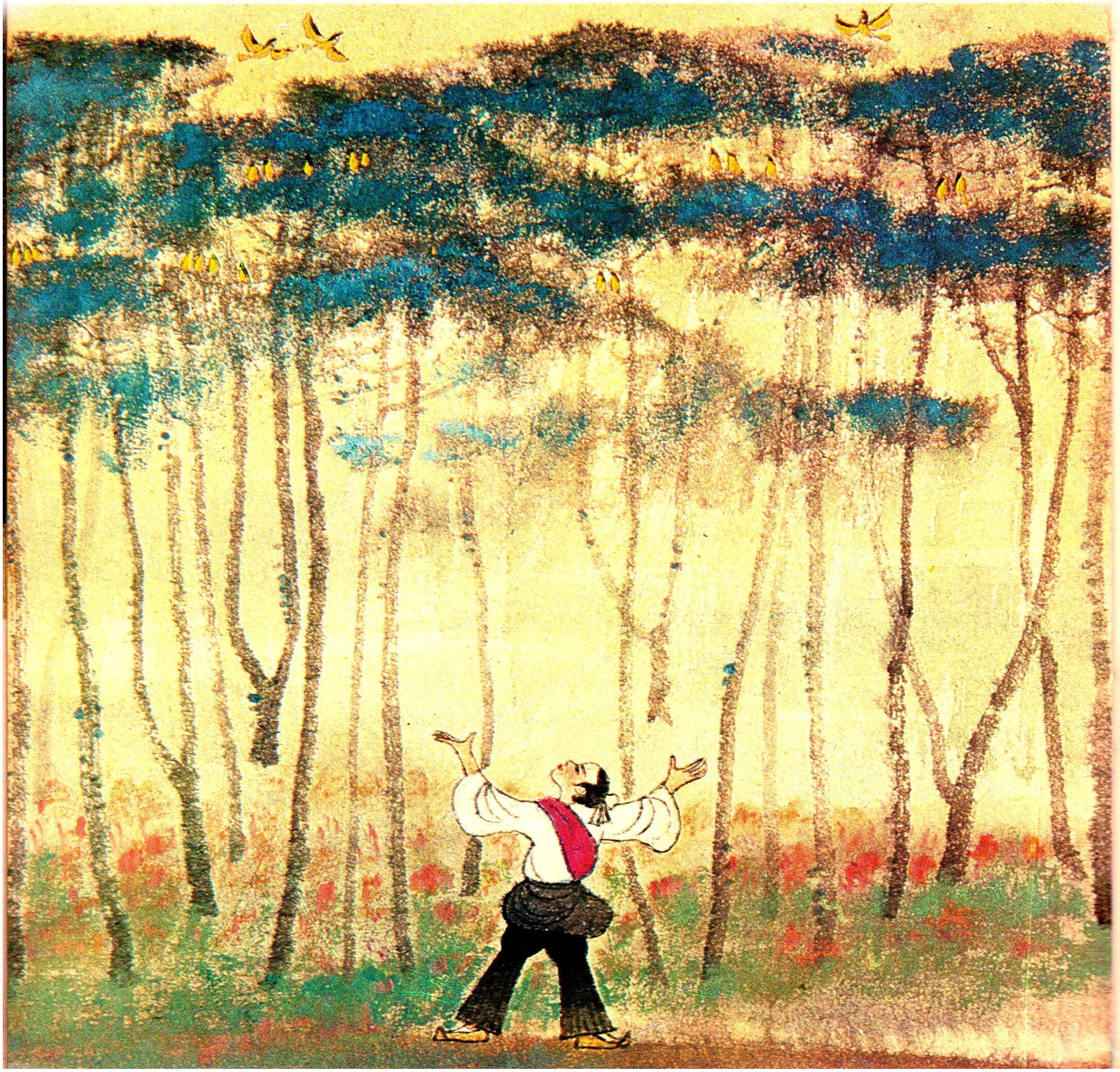
Shi Wa mounted the unicorn and they rushed through the sea of flames.

Shi Wa said, "Thank you for your help."

The unicorn replied, "Not at all. You just ask the wise old man a question for me. Why can I only rush into the sea of flames but cannot walk on the road?"

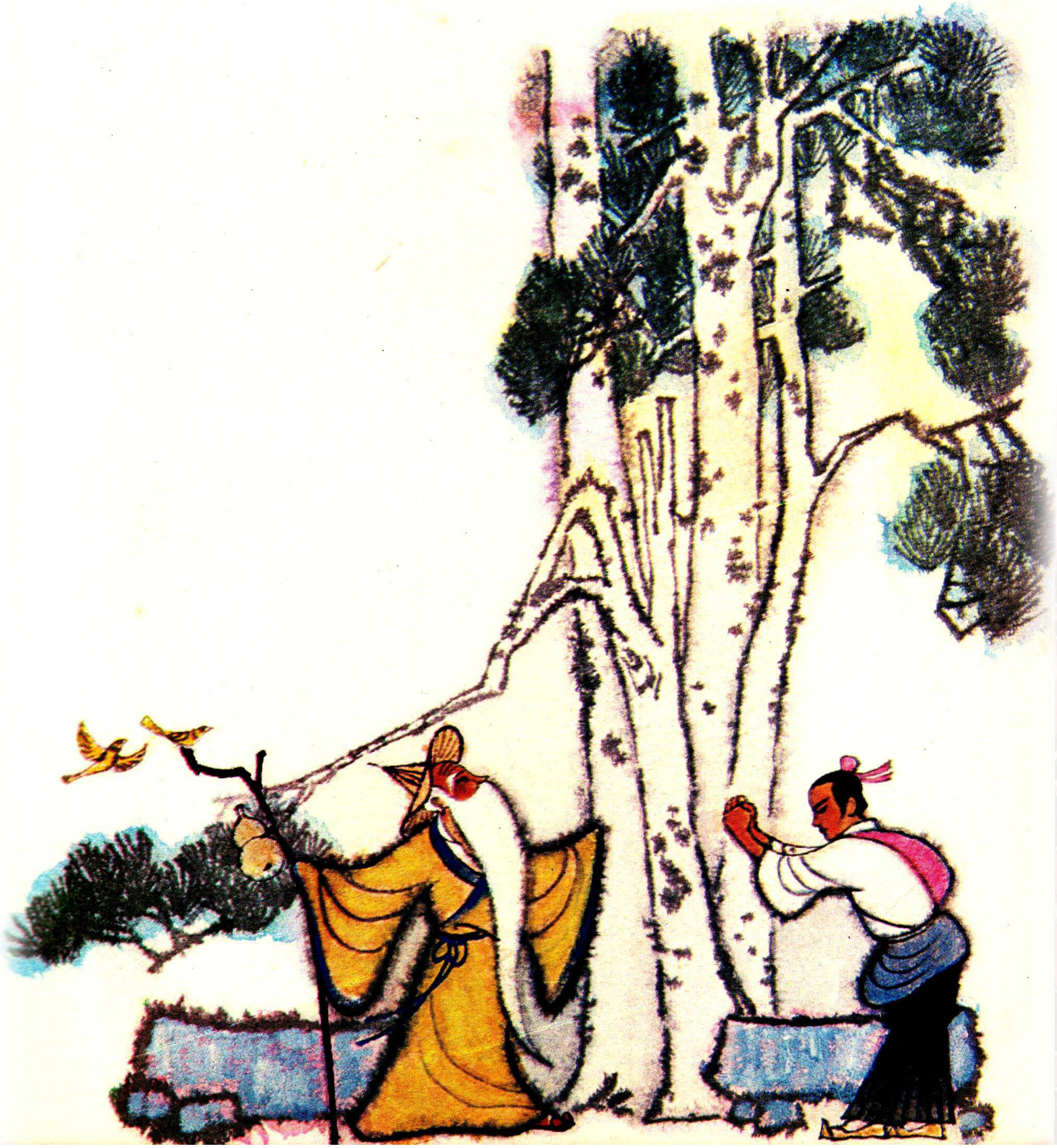
"Of course. I'll inquire about it for you," Shi Wa quickly promised.

Shi Wa continued to go south. His shoes were worn into holes and his feet were blistered from the rubbing. Yet, he went farther southwards day and night until he finished one thousand *li* at last. There, indeed, he found a vast stretch of pine trees before him. The breezes were blowing, flowers were blossoming and birds were merrily singing on the trees. It was really a nice place for the wise old man to live.



Shi Wa stayed in the forest for three days, but he didn't see anyone. Where was the wise old man? Then Shi Wa sat under a big pine tree to think. He suddenly noticed an old man with a beard coming towards him. Shi Wa quickly stood up and reverently and respectfully asked, "Excuse me, is there an old wise man here? Do you know where he is?"

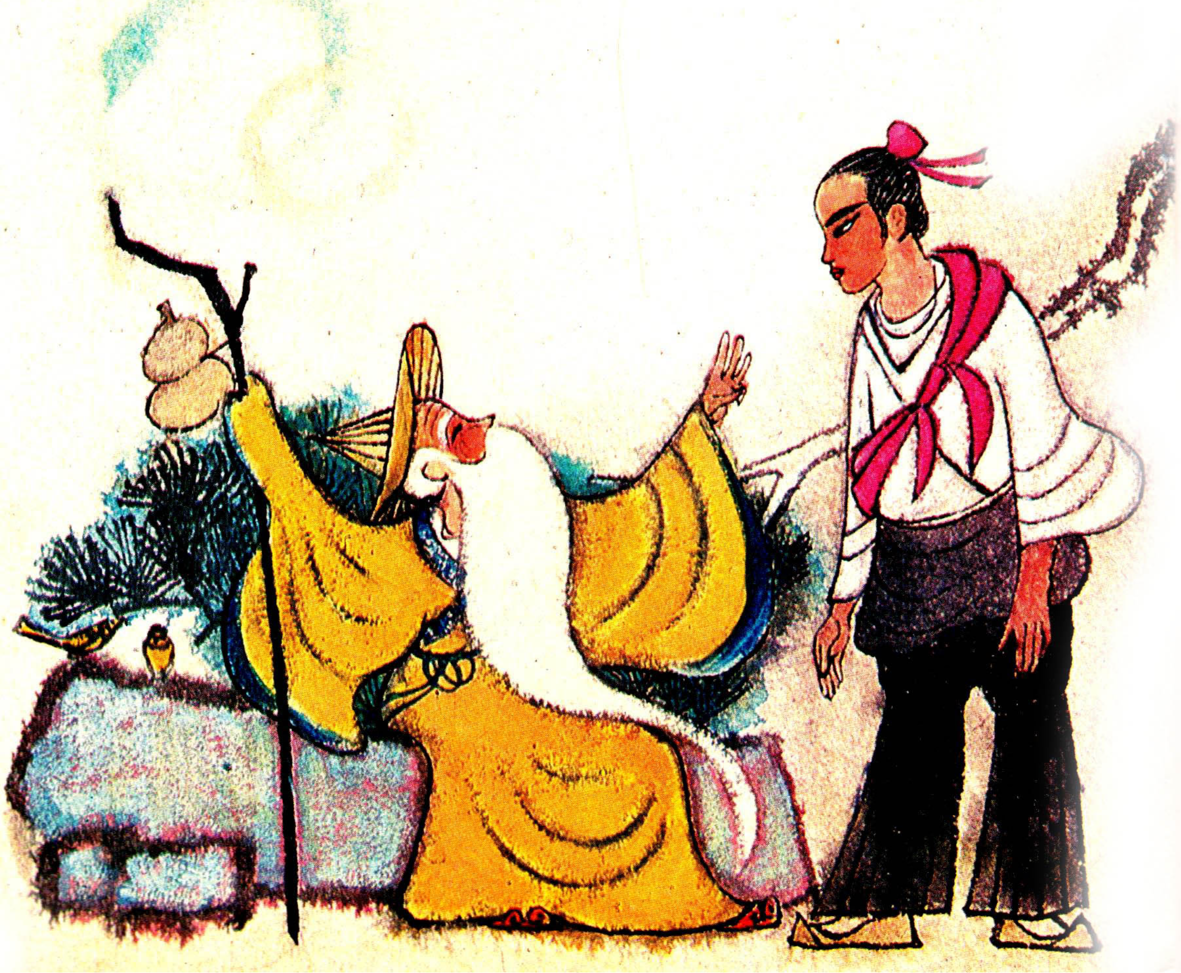
The old man laughed heartily and said: "I am the only old man here. What can I do for you?"



Shi Wa was glad and said: "I have something difficult to ask you."

The wise old man said: "Wait! You can only ask three questions. One more question is too many. You should think over which three questions you want to ask!"

Shi Wa thought, "But I have four questions. I have one for the golden dragon, one for the phoenix, one for the unicorn and my own. If I don't ask my own question, I cannot become an apprentice of the master and I cannot master the skills. If I don't ask the three other questions, the golden dragon cannot summon the wind and rain in the sky, the phoenix cannot mount the clouds and ride the mist and the unicorn cannot walk on the road. I must find out about these things for them." He decided to ask the questions for the golden dragon, the phoenix and the unicorn, but he mentioned nothing about himself. Then he took his leave from the wise old man.

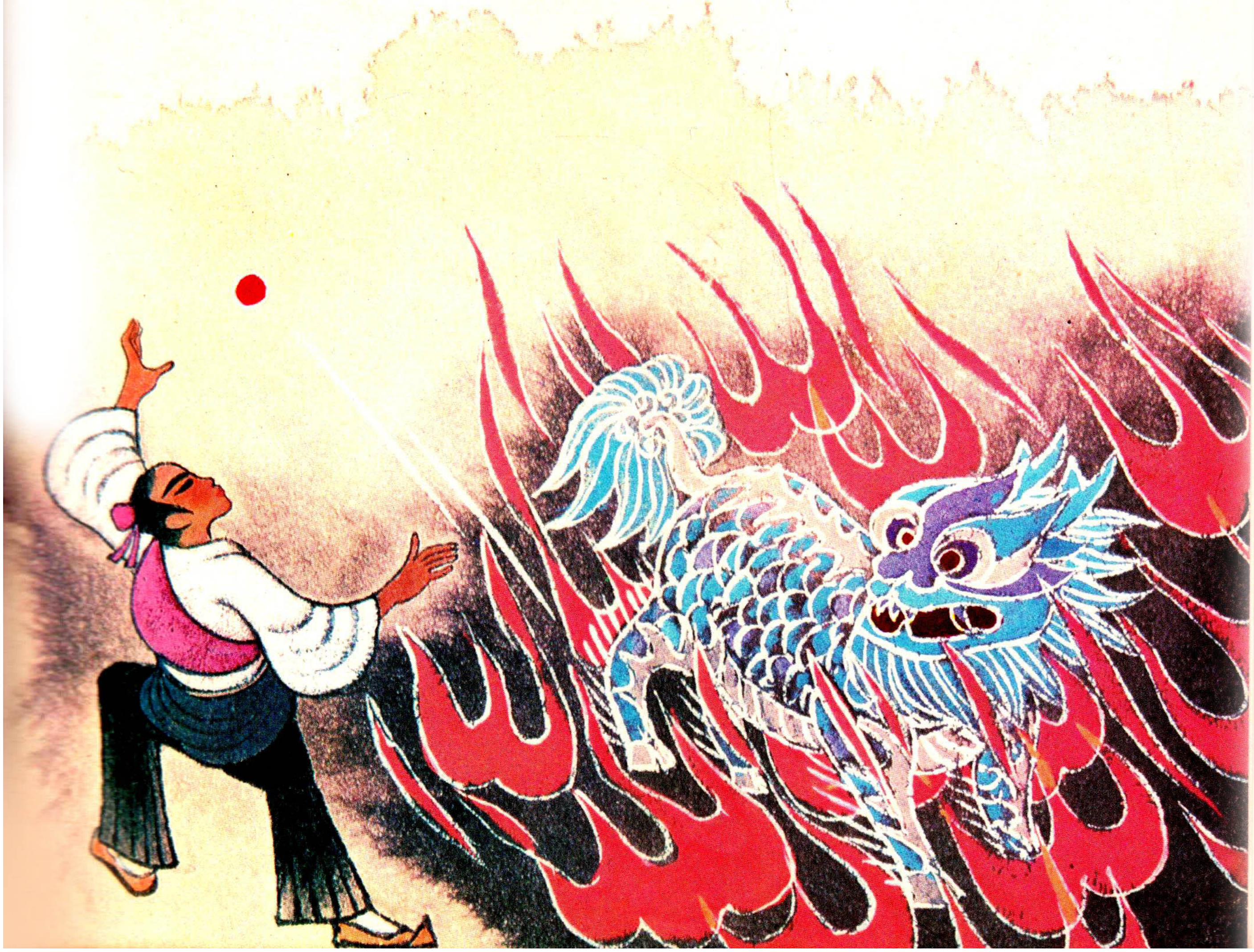


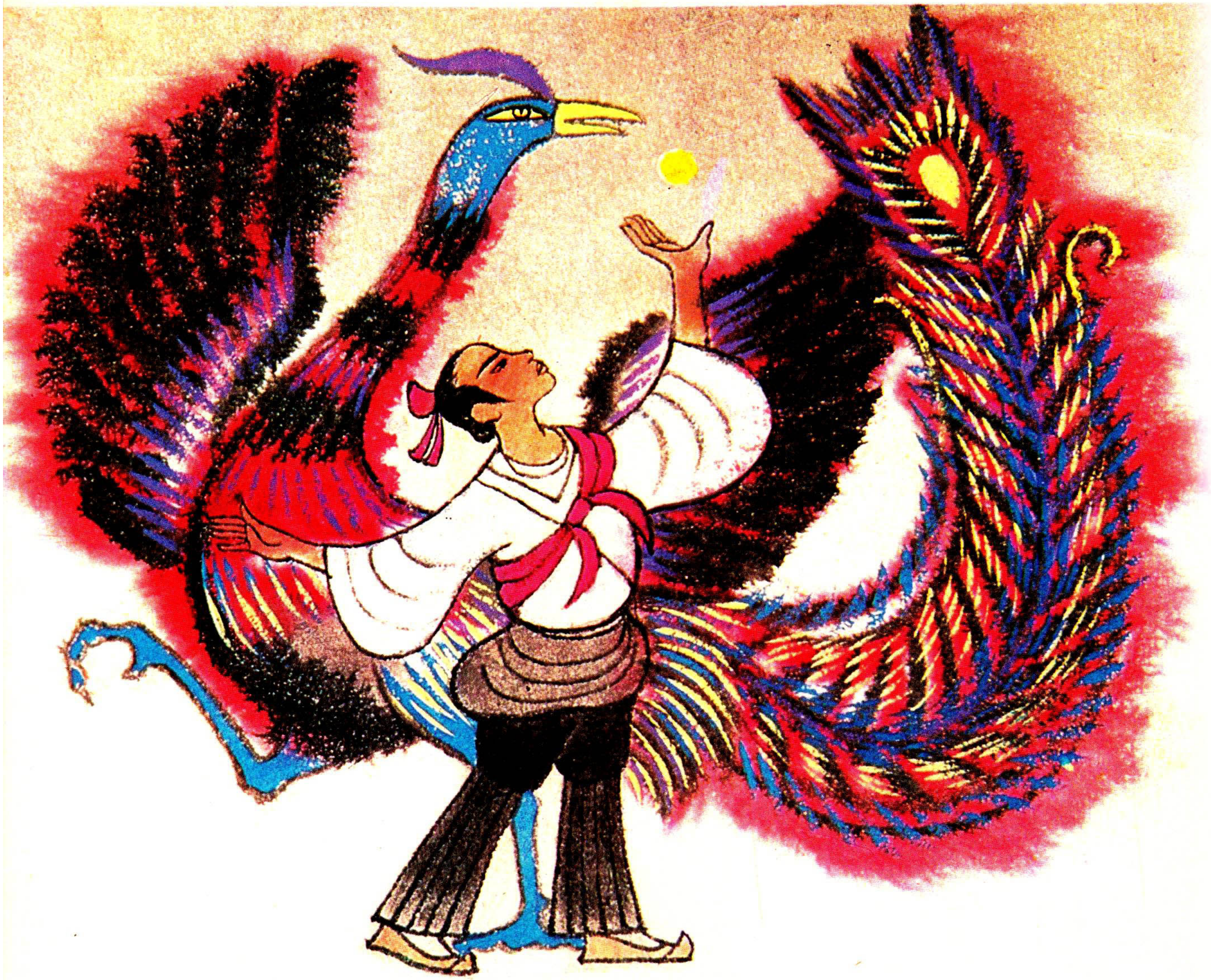
Shi Wa returned to the sea of flames. The unicorn was waiting for him eagerly and shook its horn as soon as it saw Shi Wa.

Shi Wa said: "The wise old man said that there is something caught in your right sole. If it is removed, you can walk on the road and you will feel no pain."

The unicorn's eyes lighted up and it lifted its right foot at once. A glittering and beautiful stone fell out of its sole.

The unicorn said: "You are really a good child. Thank you for your help. Let me give you this stone as a souvenir."





Shi Wa accepted the stone and continued on his way. He returned to the mountain. The phoenix flapped its wings happily as soon as it saw him.

Shi Wa said: "The wise old man said that there is a crippling sore on your tail. If you pierce and drain it, you can mount the clouds and ride the mist."

The phoenix stretched its tail at once and pecked at the sore with its beak. A shimmering yellow stone fell down.

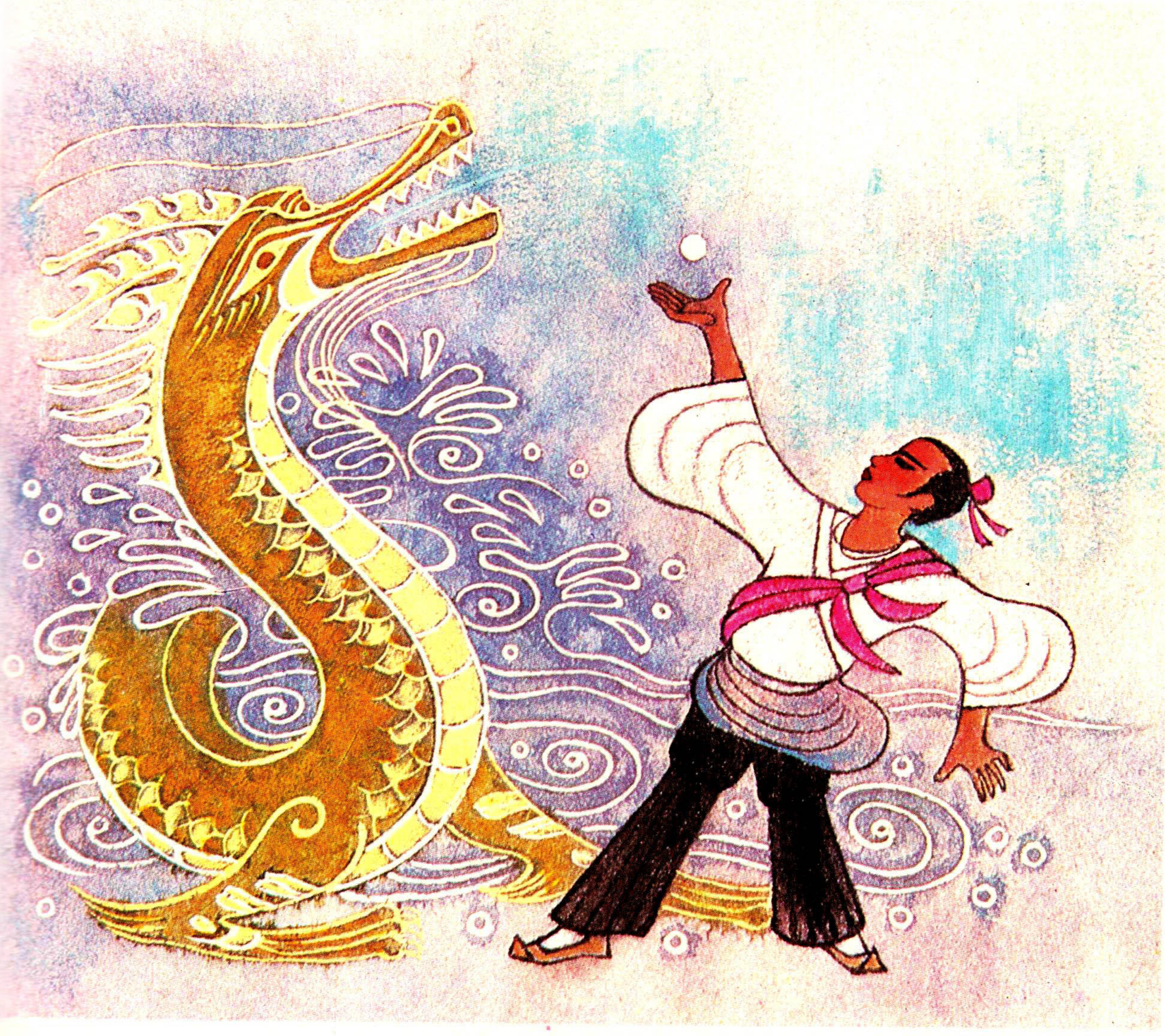
The phoenix said: "You are really a good child. Thank you for your help. Let me give you this stone as a souvenir."

Shi Wa accepted the yellow stone and continued on to the big river. The golden dragon danced with joy as soon as it saw Shi Wa.

Shi Wa was very glad and said: "The wise old man said that there is a bone struck in your throat. If you cough it out, then you can summon the wind and rain in the sky."

The golden dragon opened its mouth at once and coughed with all its might. A shiny white stone popped out.

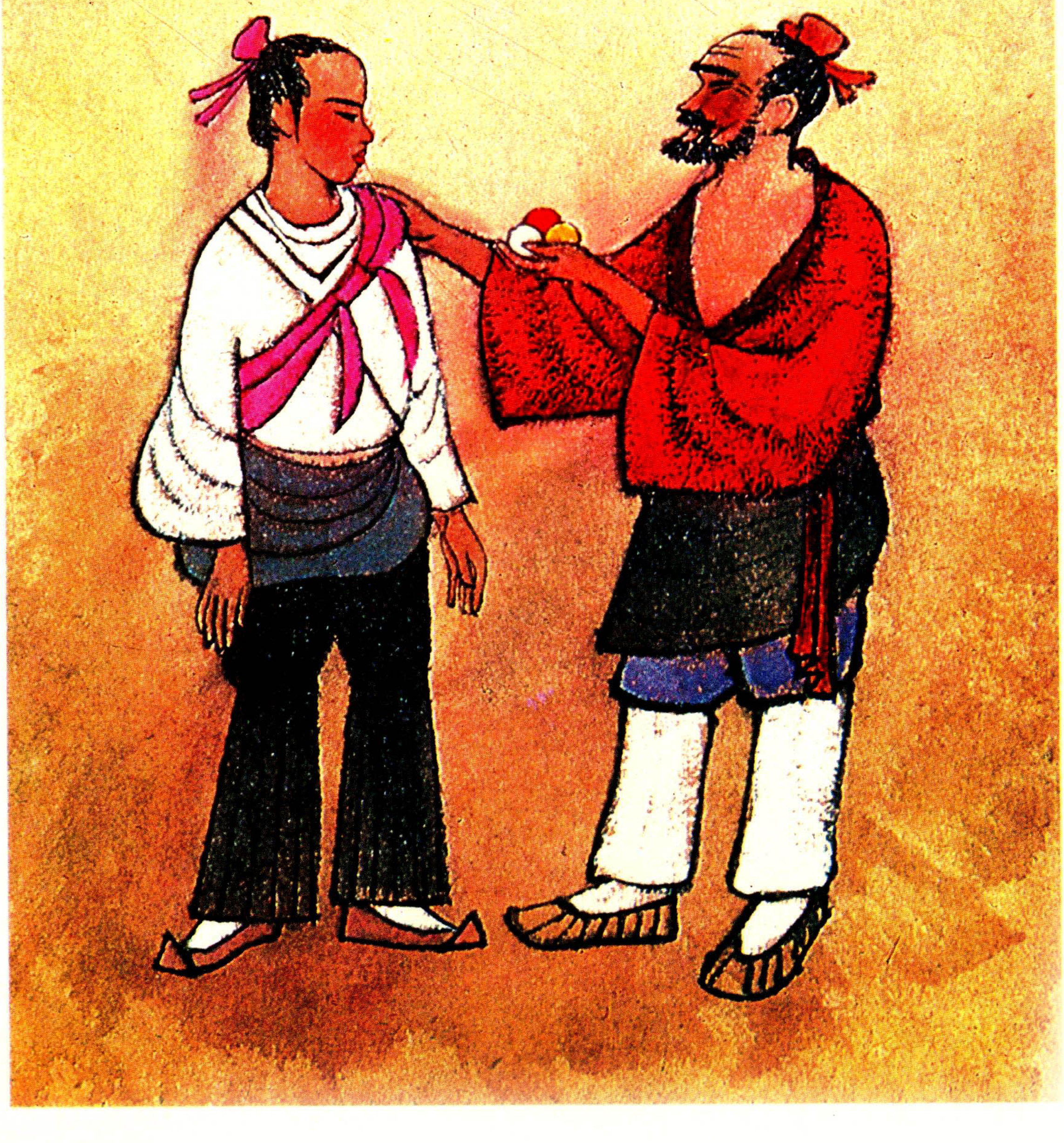
The golden dragon said: "You are really a good child. Thank you for your help. Let me give you this stone as a souvenir."



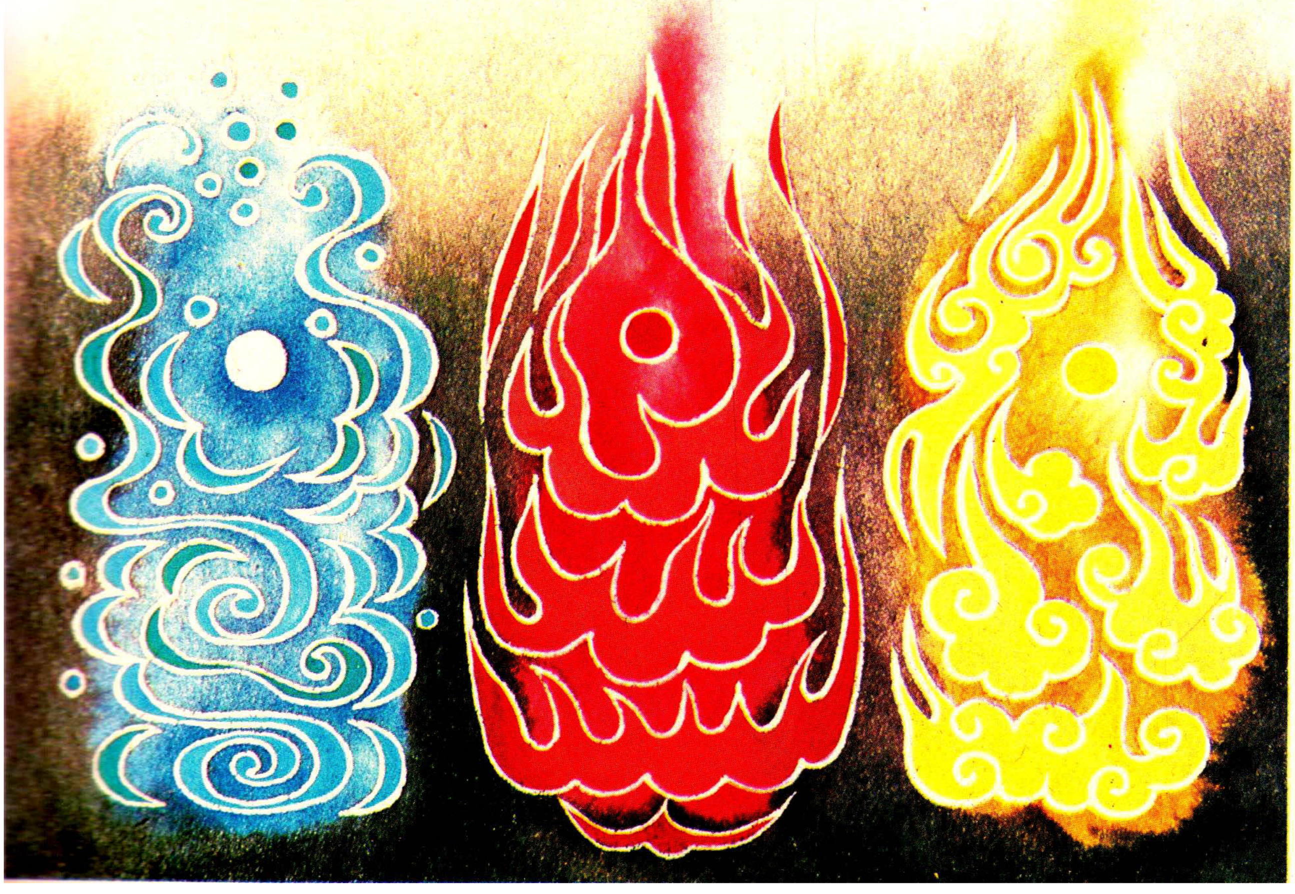
Shi Wa accepted the white stone and continued on his long journey. At last he returned to the place where the old stone cutter lived.

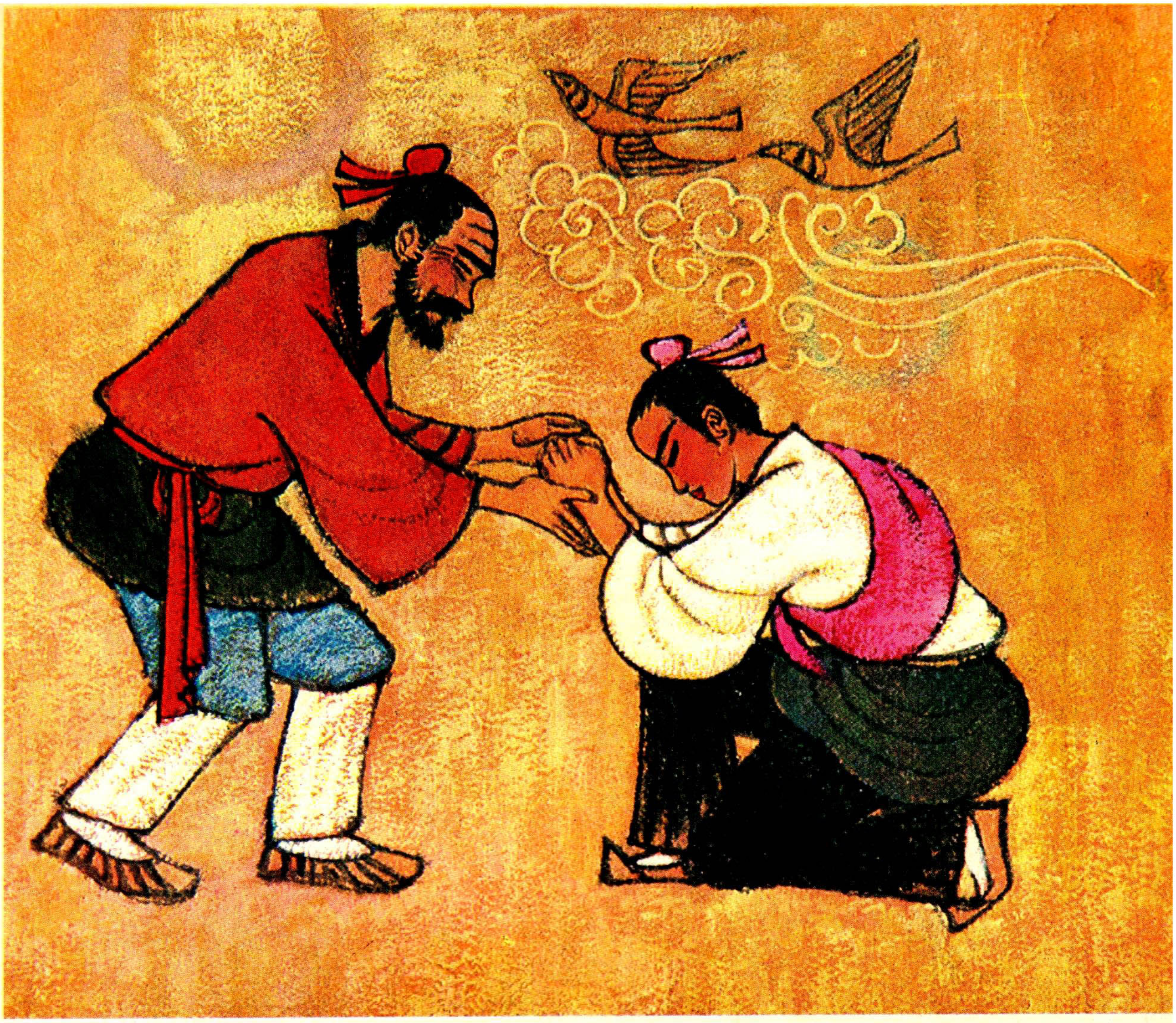
Shi Wa told the old master what he had experienced on his journey and drew the three stones from his pocket. He said, "I did not find the three precious pearls, so I cannot become your apprentice. Please accept the three stones instead. Good-bye!"

The old stone cutter took the three stones and said to Shi Wa: "Don't leave yet. What can you see in these three stones?"



Then he chiselled the white stone, revealing a dazzling white pearl. When he held it up to the water, the water receded. He chiselled the yellow stone next and uncovered a yellow pearl in it, twinkling with a myriad golden rays. The old man put it in the draught and the wind stopped blowing. Then he turned his tools to the red stone and uncovered a red pearl in it, reflecting thousands of red lights. The old stone cutter put it near the fire, the fire went out.





These were the three precious pearls that the old stone cutter wanted.

The old master laughed heartily and said, "My boy, you are not afraid of any hardship and you help others. Only in this way can you master skills and become a worthy person. You are the very apprentice I want."

After that, Shi Wa became an apprentice. He mastered the skills and became a famous stone cutter.

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